Feeling part of the group is important, but that shouldn’t mean being anonymous or invisible.

As an OSHC staff member you always have to be aware of the group needs regarding supervising, planning, setting up environments and organising activities and experiences. However, it is important to have in mind the individuals that make up that group. When OSHC staff find themselves operating as crowd controllers and lose sight of individuals, something about the service is not working properly.

As every child is different, it is important to think about, plan for, and interact with the individual, as well as the group as a whole. Consider the range of children’s styles, social interactions and personalities:

- some are quiet; others are noisy
- some like to spend time by themselves; others are the life of the party
- some are shy; others are outgoing
- some are active; others are quiet
- some enter into new situations easily; others like to stand back and watch

There are differences in cultural and language backgrounds, life experiences, temperament, interests, skills and talents. In OSHC services there is typically a wide age range among children as well.

How do you get to know individuals and use this knowledge in the service? Below are some suggestions. You and the people you work with will think of other ideas.

- If you are a new staff member, talk to colleagues who already know the children. Take advantage of what they know and how they see the child. A caution however: try not to use ‘labels’ and fixed ways of seeing a child. Everyone sees and relates to people differently. It may be hard to both listen to what others say and form your own opinion, but do try to keep an open mind about a child who is considered difficult or challenging in some way.
- Ask if you can look at the enrolment forms. They may have non-confidential information that could be useful to you in getting to know a child.
- Talk informally to the child’s family. They will have great insights about the child. Learn from their perspectives.
- Help nurture a culture among staff of talking to each other about children and sharing insights.
- Learn children’s names, greet them by name, and take every opportunity to have individual conversations with children. Be careful about talking only or mainly to the whole group or numbers of children at a time. You don’t really get to know somebody unless you interact individually.
- As you get to know children, try to notice, comment on or talk about something that is unique to that child – a new haircut or piece of clothing, a comment about something you did or talked about yesterday, something you read or heard that you think he or she might be interested in.
- Pay attention to a child who is telling you something. This is a challenge, as it might be necessary to maintain supervision and awareness of what is going on around you while at the same time engaging with the child.
- Be a good listener and observer. Spend time just watching children interact with others and engage with the material. Listen in on conversations. Make notes so that you can remember and make constructive use of the information.
- Accept individual differences in children. This doesn’t mean tolerating disruptive or destructive behaviour, but it does mean working with the fact that each child is different.
- Be aware of your own notions or biases of the ‘ideal’ child. Each of us probably has preferences – some like outgoing cheeky children, while others gravitate towards dreamy, quiet or reflective children. Think about how these ideals might affect your interactions with children. Similarly, think about what kinds of behaviour or characteristics really bother you in children. Acknowledge these biases to yourself and maybe even to your colleagues, and then work against them as you interact with children.
When a child has an additional need such as a disability, or when there is a language or cultural barrier or a behavioural problem, try to figure out ways to deal constructively with it – for example to communicate with a child who has limited English, or to truly include a child in a wheelchair.

It is important to know children as individuals and to put that knowledge into practice. What does an OSHC service that tries hard to cater for individuals look like? Following are some indicators:

- At all times, there are choices of things to do among a range of different kinds of activities.
- There is flexibility about who is doing what, when and for how long. There are relatively few if any times when everyone is expected to do the same thing.
- The majority of materials are open-ended – that is, they lend themselves to a variety of uses so that children can adapt them to their own interests and agendas.
- Children are asked what they like about the service, what they would change, what they want. Even when their wants and wishes can’t be accommodated, staff find it useful to know what they are. Feedback may be in the form of a suggestion box. There are discussions with individuals and in groups about how the service is meeting children’s needs. A culture where children come to know, through experience that their ideas are taken seriously exists. When children make a request, staff adopt a ‘why not’ approach instead of reacting with an immediate ‘can’t do’.
- Staff’s respect for and acceptance of children is evident in the quality of interactions.

It can be difficult to get to know children when they come part-time or if you only work part-time. However, it is essential to make the effort to form meaningful relationships with all children.

Links to Shared visions
Chapter 2: A vision and way of thinking, p.27 Image of the child
Chapter 6: Planning and evaluating OSHC programs, p.83 Group meetings or conferences
Chapter 7: The environment

Questions and reflections
1. Choose the child in the group that you know the least well. Why is this? Develop a plan to get to know that child better. Think about how you will use your new knowledge.
2. Identify three examples of ways that your service takes into account an interest of an individual child.
3. Identify three new things that you have learned about a particular child in the past week.
4. How many individual conversations have you had this week with each child? How can you improve on this?